

**MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY TO INCREASE
AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY**

CLOSING REMARKS

MAY 11, 2004

Thank you for giving me the opportunity of addressing this audience, at the closing of an intense, but unprecedented meeting.

I believe that we have made a quantum leap forward and personally, I believe that we have renewed our energy in our efforts to increase agriculture productivity in the region.

IICA's 2002-2066 Medium Term Plan clearly states that the promotion of technological innovation and the incorporation of new technologies in agriculture is a priority action in the Americas.

In this Conference, we have seen how investment in technology is essential to increasing agriculture productivity and thereby contributing to the reduction of poverty.

It is also clear that investment in agricultural research for the sustainable growth of the agricultural sector holds the most important promise for alleviating rural poverty in our countries.

The new agriculture will be led by global trade based on competitive agribusinesses which produce value added products that conform to agricultural health and food safety standards while respecting the environment. The key to the success of this new paradigm is technology.

On average, almost 40% of all increases in food production in the Americas during the last four decades have been due to the use of modern technology mainly improved seed varieties, and agronomic information.

We have seen how the disparity in productivity for certain commodities in different countries is, in part, a consequence of their unequal development in research and extension capacities.

Countries with greater relative development, usually invest between 1.5% and 2.5% of their agricultural gross product in agricultural technology.

For the majority of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, however, this average only reaches 0.4%. On the positive side, however, some countries such as Costa Rica have been increasingly investing in improved technology for agriculture.

Research in biotechnology is a critical component to increasing crop yields and agricultural productivity. Developing countries, however, often do not have the capacity or resources for investing in biotechnological research, which is one more cause for the widening gap between developed and developing countries.

Despite the efforts of the agricultural research centres, and other foundations, most of the biotechnological information is in the hands of the private sector, which may explain why the greatest advances in biotechnology relate to rice, maize, wheat and cotton. Yet the majority of the population in the south survives on rice, sorghum, millet, yams cassava, beans and other pulses.

If I may, I would like to reiterate here that one of IICA's institutional priorities is indeed to support our Member States in their efforts to improve their technological situation so that they may better compete in the agribusiness market and, therefore, participate more actively in international trade.

To do so, IICA acts as a hemispheric platform to strengthen national agricultural research systems, foster the exchange of technological information between countries, and promote greater cohesion between regional mechanisms for research cooperation policy.

This conference is another step in this direction.

We are committed to supporting Member States in their actions to enhance technological development in agriculture, in search of greater competitiveness and environmentally friendly technological development.

Establishing a favourable environment and building capacity for agribusiness development, especially for small- and medium-scale producers, is a field of action where IICA has increased its efforts by strengthening its relations with national organizations and with the private sector and by promoting foreign trade.

IICA programs to "create exporters" and to strengthen agribusiness networks have shown positive results in Central America. We will continue to enhance these programs with actions to upgrade agribusiness management capabilities, and to foster strategic alliances among private actors to boost their competitiveness in global markets.

The "Inter-American Program for the Promotion of Agricultural Trade, Agribusiness and Food Safety" and the "Export Platforms" are two current programs whose objectives are to promote and develop export capabilities so as to facilitate access to international markets, diversify and increase the number of exporters, and increase the value of agri-food exports.

Strong leadership in food safety and the development of environmentally friendly technologies are necessary to bring together all the actors in the agri-food chain; their actions must be strengthened by clear policies and specific norms that are consistent with international agreements and standards, and based on sound science.

Agricultural health and food safety institutions must adjust to allow for greater integration and information sharing among all players.

Strategic partnerships with the public and private sectors are crucial for developing sustainable agriculture and agribusiness, be it in the Americas or anywhere else in the world.

This Conference has opened some very real possibilities for the implementation of solid strategy for the improvement of agriculture productivity.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our deep commitment in support of technological developments in agriculture in Central America, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. We are here to serve you and to support you in your efforts to promote sustainable agricultural development in the region.

Thank you.